McNamara: Arms race born in '62 Cuban crisis

If a U.S. first strike against the relatively weak Soviets did not make sense in 1962, then a Soviet first strike against the United States makes less sense now that both sides have reached parity.

By Robert Scheer
Los Angeles Times Service

Soviet fears of a surprise U.S. nuclear first strike after the Cuban missile crisis may have triggered the massive Soviet buildup of intercontinental missiles in the 1960s and set off the nuclear arms race, according to former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara.

In a recent interview, McNamara cited a recently declassified document that indicates that the U.S. Air Force wanted the United States to build a first-strike capability in 1962, McNamara and President Kennedy vetoed that proposal.

The document was released under the Freedom of Information Act.

McNamara, who was secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968, has challenged the notion held by President Reagan and others that the Soviets' nuclear buildup of the late 1960s and 1970s was designed to gain a first-strike nuclear attack capability. Rather, McNamara contended, the buildup can be seen as a reaction to the earlier U.S. military buildup and to rumors that the United States was preparing to strike first at the Soviet Union.

"I have no doubt but that the Soviets thought we were trying to achieve a first-strike capability," McNamara said. "We were not. We did not have it; we could not attain it; we didn't have any thought of attaining it. But they probably thought we did."

Had he been the Soviet defense secretary at the time, McNamara said, "I would have been worried as hell about the imbalance of force. And I would have been concerned that the United States was trying to build a first-strike capability ... because I would have had knowledge of what the nuclear strength was of the United States, and I would have heard the rumors that the Air Force was recommending achievement of such a capability."

In the document, titled Memorandum for the President and dated Nov. 21, 1962, McNamara warned President Kennedy: "It has become clear to me that the Air Force proposals ... are based on the objective of achieving a first-strike capability."

McNamara then quoted to Kennedy part of an Air Force report that supported "the development of forces which provide the United States a first-strike capability credible to the Soviet Union, as well as to our allies."

Beyond deterral

In McNamara's judgment, the Air Force recommendation went beyond the requirement of deterring a Soviet attack. He wrote at the time: "What is at issue here is whether our forces should be augmented beyond what I am recommending in an attempt to achieve a capability to start a thermonuclear war in which the resulting damage to ourselves and our allies could be considered acceptable on some reasonable definition of the term."

McNamara cited in the 1962 document a memorandum he had sent Kennedy the year before, in which he had defined a "full first-strike capability" as a capability that "would be achieved if our forces were so large and so effective, in relation to those of the Soviet Union, that we would be able to attack and reduce Soviet retaliatory power to the point at which it could not cause severe damage to U.S. population and industry."

The 1962 memo added, "I indicated then and I reaffirm now my belief that the 'full first-strike capability' — and I now include the Air Force's variant of it — should be rejected as a U.S. policy objective."

McNamara's reason for rejecting the first-strike option was that the Soviets had submarine-launched ballistic missiles that would survive a first-strike attack. He estimated that the Soviet forces surviving a first strike could inflict 50 million direct fatalities on the United States. "I do not consider this an 'acceptable' level of damage," he told Kennedy.

Debate anew

McNamara's latest comments come amid the current U.S. debate over whether the Soviets now have a first-strike capability, as President Reagan said last week.

In his recent interview, McNamara said that if a U.S. first strike against the Soviets did not make sense in 1962, when they were relatively weak, then a Soviet first strike against the United States makes less sense now that both sides have reached parity.

"They [the Soviets] no more have a first-strike capability today than we had then," he said.

The following are excerpts from the Los Angeles Times interview with McNamara:

Scheer — What about the geopolitical balance? We hear how the Soviets have gotten stronger and how they've made gains all over the world.

McNamara — I, myself, believe they've gotten weaker. That may sound naive when one says it in the face of what has clearly been an increase in the number of their nuclear weapons and an increase in their conventional forces — not nearly as great, by the way, as many say, but still an increase. But I think they've gotten weaker because, economically and politically, there have been some very serious failures. In my opinion, they are in a weaker position today than they were 14 to 15 years ago.

Scheer — You said that the increase in Soviet conventional forces is not as great as many say.

McNamara — I'll expand that to make two points: Soviet conventional strength is not as great as many state it to be, and the NATO conventional weakness is not as great as it is frequently said to be. Therefore, the conventional balance is not as favorable to the Soviets as is often assumed.

The Soviet advantage in tanks is frequently used to illustrate the strength of the Soviets and the weakness of the West. I believe the Warsaw Pact countries have three times as many tanks as the NATO countries.

But our response to the Soviet tanks should not necessarily be a one-to-one expansion of our tank force, but rather an expansion of our anti-tank weapons.

In this country we commonly exaggerate the imbalance of Warsaw Pact and NATO conventional forces. In my opinion, NATO conventional forces are very strong indeed. They are not as strong as I would like to see them, not as strong as they ought to be, not as strong as they can be by applying modern technology within realistic budget constraints. But, still, they are a much greater deterrent to Soviet aggression than we commonly recognize.

Scheer — One of the arguments that is made by the administration is that the Soviets are engaged in an unrelenting, massive military buildup, in both conventional and strategic weapons, and that we now have to counter that.

McNamara — I don't want to get into an argument with the administration; I just want to state what I believe is a fact, which is that we overstate the Soviets' force and we understate ours, and we therefore greatly overstate the imbalance. This is not something that is new; it has been going on for years.

Scheer — Did it go on while you were secretary of defense?

McNamara — Of course it did. I tried to correct it; I frequently made statements correcting it, but because it appears to serve the interests of some to consciously or unconsciously overstate the Soviet strength and understate ours, that frequently occurs.

Scheer — Who are the "some"?

McNamara — Well, particular elements of our society that feel their programs are benefited by that. The missile gap of 1960 was a function of forces within the Defense Department that, perhaps unconsciously, were trying to support their particular program — in that case, an expansion of U.S. missile production — by overstating the Soviet force.

I don't want to state that they were consciously misstating the facts, but there is an unconscious bias in all of us.

Scheer — On the first-strike question, was there a shift? You are always associated with the "mutually assured destruction" deterrence notion. Yet some people have argued that within the period in which you were in charge, there was a shift in the targeting scenario, and that was when the beginning of the notion of limited nuclear war actually started.

McNamara — No, no, we moved from [Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles' strategy of massive retaliation to what was called "flexible response." That was, I think, a major advance because it substantially reduced the risk of nuclear war. And the level at which nuclear weapons might be used under flexible response was raised so high that if was, in effect, the equivalent of mutual assured destruction.

The point on the Soviet concern about our first strike is an important one. [He lifts a document.] This is a highly classified memorandum from me to President Kennedy, dated Nov. 21, 1962. In the memorandum I state, "It has become clear to me the Air Force proposals are based on the objective of achieving a first-strike capability. In the words of an Air Force report to me, 'The Air Force has rather supported the development of forces which provide the United States a first-strike capability.'" This is my memo to the President and that is a proper quote from the Air Force. The Soviets didn't have this document, at least I hope they didn't. But they may have heard talk that we were trying to achieve a first-strike capability and, in any case, they saw the size force we had.

Associated Press

McNamara discusses U.S., Soviet nuclear strength at a news conference with George F. Kennan (left) in Washington this week

The issue of first-strike capability is absolutely fundamental. And I have no question but that the Soviets thought we were trying to achieve a first-strike capability. We were not. We did not have it; we could not attain it; we didn't have any thought of attaining it. But they probably thought we did.

Scheer — Well, also, the argument that is made here now is based on finding Soviet defense manuals. If the Soviets did have access to this or some other document, that is a lot stronger than what arms control negotiator Paul Nitze or National Security Council Soviet expert Richard Pipes or these people come up with about Soviet intentions. All we can point to on the argument of Minuteman vulnerability is that they have a civil defense program, why are they piling on the missiles ... As far as I know, we don't have any statement by them ...

McNamara — No, absolutely not. But if I had been the Soviet secretary of defense, I'd have been worried as hell at the imbalance of force. And I would have been concerned that the United States was trying to build a first-strike capability. I would have been concerned simply because I would have had knowledge of what the nuclear strength was of the United States and I would have heard the rumors that the Air Force was recommending achievement of such a capability.

You put those two things together: a known force disadvantage that is large enough in itself to at least appear to support the view that the United States was planning a first-strike capability and, secondly, talk among U.S. personnel that that was the objective — it would have just scared the hell out of me. That memo is dated November '62. It's by coincidence a month after the Cuban missile crisis.

That, I think, lends some support to the point I'm making.

However, I want to re-emphasize these points: Number one, I didn't believe, and President Kennedy didn't believe, we had a first-strike capability. Number two, we didn't have any intention of trying to attain a first-strike capability. Number three, if we had had any such intention, there is no way we could have done it in my opinion.

Scheer — If you couldn't have done it then, how could one make the claim that the Soviets could do it now?

McNamara — They no more have a first-strike capability today than we had then. No one has demonstrated to me that the Soviets have a capability of destroying our Minutemen [land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles]. But even if they could destroy our Minutemen, that doesn't give them a first-strike capability, not when they are facing our Polaris submarines and our bombers. The other two legs of the triad [air, land and sea basing of missiles] are still there.

Scheer — The argument that is made is that they would destroy enough of ours that they could come back —

McNamara — The argument is without foundation. It's absurd. To try to destroy the 1,054 Minutemen, the Soviets would have to plan to ground-burst two nuclear warheads of one megaton each on each site. That is 2,000 megatons, roughly 160,000 times the megatonnage of the Hiroshima bomb. What condition do you think our country would be in when 2,000 one-megaton bombs ground-burst? The idea that, in such a situation, we would sit here and say, "Well, we don't want to launch against them because they might come back and hurt us," is inconceivable!

And the idea that the Soviets are today sitting in Moscow and thinking, "We've got the U.S. over a barrel because we're capable of putting 2,000 megatons of ground-burst on them and in such a situation we know they will be scared to death and fearful of retaliation; therefore we are free to conduct political blackmail," is too incredible to warrant serious debate.

Scheer — Let's return to the issue of the buildup of nuclear forces. How did it occur?

McNamara — Go back to 1960, when many in the U.S. believed there was a missile gap favoring the Soviets. With hindsight it became clear there wasn't any missile gap. But Kennedy had been told there was. What actually happened was this: In the summer of 1960, there were two elements in the U.S. intelligence community disagreeing on the relative levels of the U.S. and Soviet strategic nuclear forces.

It's a little like the conventional force situation I discussed earlier. One element greatly overstated the level of the Soviet nuclear force vis-a-vis the other element. The first element had data which they believed justified their interpretation. When one looked over it, it became clear the data didn't justify the conclusion.

And within two years of that time, the advantage in the U.S. warhead inventory was so great vis-a-vis the Soviets that the Air Force was saying that they felt we had a first-strike capability and could, and should, continue to have one. If the Air Force thought that, imagine what the Soviets thought.

The way they reacted was by substantially expanding their strategic nuclear weapons program. Now, when they did that, we sat back here and saw the way they were moving — and we always had to take account of their capability more than their intentions, because we weren't sure of their intentions. We looked at their capability, and they were building submarines, missiles and planes, and experimenting with new warheads, at such a rate that we had to respond.

We probably over-responded because it is likely that their capability, which we observed, exceeded their intentions.

So you have an action-reaction phenomenon. And the result is that during the last 25 years, and particularly during the last 15, there has been a huge buildup, much more than people realize, in the nuclear strength of these two forces. That has changed the nature of the problem and increased the risk greatly. I have read that the total inventory of warheads in the two arsenals is on the order of 50,000.

Scheer — What is so scary about this is ... how did this happen?

McNamara — Because the potential victims have not been brought into the debate yet, and it's about time we brought them in.

Lotteries

Pennsylvania

DAILY
April 8, 1982
501

BIG 4
April 7, 1982
4928

BIG 50
April 7, 1982
Red: 460
White: 15
Blue: 7
Bonus: 365089

23 for 1
April 7, 1982
60309
0714
282

New Jersey

PICK IT
April 7, 1982
901
Straight: $307
Box: $51
Pairs: $30.50

PICK 6
April 1, 1982
12 04 21 11 15 20
Bonus: 93919

PICK 4
April 6, 1982
1215
Straight: $739
No box payoff

Delaware

DAILY
April 8, 1982
047

PLAY 4
April 8, 1982
2022

For lottery information:
Pennsylvania 215-271-1600
New Jersey 609-936-9360
Delaware 302-736-5291

Clearing the record

A March 25 report in The Inquirer incorrectly implied that a bill approved by a U.S. House subcommittee would relax air pollution control requirements for all companies that build new plants or expand existing ones.

The bill would repeal the requirement that companies building in polluted areas install the best control technology in use anywhere in the nation. However, those companies still would be required to install control equipment similar to that generally in use within industry.

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The Inquirer incorrectly reported yesterday that corroded tubing in Three Mile Island's Unit 1 reactor would be repaired by inserting sleeves into the 1.5-inch-diameter, 56-foot-long steam generator tubes. While "sleeving" may be used for some tubes, the bulk of the 8,000 to 10,000 damaged tubes will be repaired by expanding existing tube walls and resealing them below the corroded areas.

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